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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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Tender of Heart

*Soft and tender are saints,
no one else in the world is like them.*

*There is no one else like them;
they are kind and merciful to all.*

*Foe and friend are alike to them,
and alike are bad luck and good fortune.*

*They are as tender as flowers;
not even in a dream do they see other's faults.*

*They ever wish well to others,
for they savour the wine of divine love.*

*Affable to all, with a gentle smile,
soft and sweet of speech are they.*

*Cheerful whatever happens, they emanate coolness;
in every glance they radiate compassion.*

*Whatever one might say to them,
O Paltu, they are not in the least perturbed.*

*Soft and tender are saints,
no one else in the world is like them.*

Saint Paltu: His Life and Teachings



From My Will to His Will

Faith – an element so crucial to our prayers ... or is it? Is faith built in our prayers or are our prayers mainly lip service? Do we crib and cry, wail and whine when things do not go our way rather than showing our gratitude for everything that the Master does for us? Do we want our will instead of His will?

But We Want My Will

More often than not, our disposition is that if things are going our way and we are being praised, being promoted, being cared for, then it is, of course, due to our abilities, aptitude and warmth of character. Yet, if the reverse happens and we have to face some unhappy times, then tears flow. We question and wonder why this is happening to us. We will make sure that the Master listens to our cries and complaints, and then wait for him to act according to our wishes. If nothing happens, we become bitter, get upset and lose the little faith we have. And while we all know the karma theory, and the concept comes easy to us, it is the practice that takes the most out of us.

Of course, this means that we think that our Master is not able to know the situation by himself. The truth is that the inner Master hears all our thoughts. And at the end of the day, the sum of all our negative thoughts, desires, is in fact, our prayer. Mirdad describes our sad situation very strongly in the following lines:

Rather than be grateful ... some would make of God a sort of dumping hole where to cart ... their losses in a trade, their quarrels, their revenges ... While others would have God as their exclusive treasure-house where they expect to find ... whatever they did crave of all the tinselled trinkets of this world.

And others still would make of God a sort of personal book-keeper. He must ... collect their debts and always show a fat and handsome balance in their favour.

Aye, many are the tasks that men assign to God. Yet, few seem to think that if, indeed, God was so charged with many tasks, He would perform them all alone and would require no man to goad Him on, or to remind Him of His tasks.

Do you remind God of the hours for the sun to rise and for the moon to set? Do you remind Him of the countless things that fill His boundless universe? Why do you then press your puny selves with all your trifling needs upon His memory?

And where is God that you should shout into His ear your whims and vanities, your praises and your complaints? Is He not in you and all about you? Is not His ear much nearer to your mouth than is your tongue to your palate?

Take not to God your countless cares and hopes. But search the vastness of your hearts. For in the vastness of your heart is found the key to every door.

The Book of Mirdad

From My Will to His Will

Yet, how do we make ourselves strong enough to let go of our need for our wishes and desires to be granted? The best way that we can achieve true faith is by our spiritual experience – by our meditation. This is, in essence, the true prayer asked of us – the silent, ceaseless prayer.

We have to learn to accept the fact that we are sometimes helpless to stop an unwelcome change in our lives. In a world in which things constantly change and end, an attitude of acceptance makes sense. We need the ability to be satisfied with doing our best and letting the chips fall where they may.

Meditation helps us accept, helps us appreciate whatever we are faced with. Focused meditation transforms the way we perceive things and the way we live our life. When we meditate, we gain the perspective to see the dramas of our life as small, rather than as unsolvable problems. We train ourselves to operate from a perspective of accepting, letting go and being free. It is an attitude of obedience to a power we have accepted as greater than 'me'.

As John Davidson expresses so eloquently in *One Being One*:

When we think we have been abandoned, He may be protecting us. When we wonder where His help has gone, He may be supporting our every step. When we think we are unloved, He may be cradling us in His arms ... When we think we have doubts, He may be deepening our faith.

Yet, until and unless we use this method of meditation so graciously gifted to us, our mind will not allow us to experience this feeling. It will not allow the real acceptance of His will.

So let us not take this gift for granted. As Maharaj Charan Singh has explained in *Legacy of Love*:

There is only one way to subdue the mind, to rub it with the Shabd every day. Just as when there is rust on a knife, you rub it on sandstone, and slowly and slowly, the rust goes and the knife shines.

Let us rub our knives on the sandstone of Shabd, removing our rust of 'my will', so that one day, we will shine in 'His will'.



Spiritual Maturity

*Constantly mastering his mind, the spiritual man grows peaceful,
attains supreme bliss, and returns to the Absolute One.*

Bhagavad Gita

When we consider the term ‘maturity’, usually what comes to mind is the physical and mental development of a child who progressively grows to become an adult. Physical maturity pertains to the development of physical attributes, whereas mental maturity refers to the advancement of mental skills and character traits that are a combined result of both education and experience. As we continue to mature, we start to become more responsible for our actions as we are given ‘the space’ to learn from both experience and possibly even mistakes.

The mystics tell us that there is a more subtle type of maturity that exists and it involves the soul, the real self, one’s true identity. This maturity, which is of great significance, is not only concerned with one’s present life, but with all past and future lives, as it is directly linked to the immortal soul. Spiritual maturity entails the progressive development of those fine attributes (such as goodness, humility, honesty, faithfulness, patience, and so forth) which would enable the soul to return to its source – its absolute and purest form. This process, however, requires tremendous effort directed at eliminating negative passions and tendencies that have accumulated over several lifetimes and formed a dark veil over the soul, rendering it helpless and hostage to the mind and senses.

Spiritual maturity is, therefore, an ongoing process – a long and arduous one without doubt, but one whose culmination results

in a perfect state of equanimity, balance and peace; teaching us to discipline the mind by not yielding to the senses, and to accept one's destiny and live in the will of the Lord. The saints, in their writings, often give the example of the lotus flower. Although the flower grows in muddy water, it leaves the mud behind to rise above the surface and blooms in remarkable beauty – untouched by impurity.

The mystics advise us that spiritual maturity requires a deeper level of understanding, and this can be attained by channelizing all the knowledge and principles of spirituality that we gain through the practice of meditation. At the time of initiation, the spiritual Master imparts the technique of meditation which helps to concentrate and control the mind by withdrawing the attention from the senses and directing it inwards. This technique is the foundation of our spiritual practice; its right application coupled with regular effort will determine the pace and quality of our maturity. This is the method prescribed by the perfect saints for training the mind and relinquishing the ego.

Eventually, we will learn that the path to maturity, even in the case of spirituality, leads one away from the self. As we learn to achieve some control over our mind and subdue our ego, we find that we are in a much better position to relinquish control and surrender to His divine will. We learn to expand our thinking from a limited point of view to a broader, grander perspective. We realize that our actions are primarily motivated by selfish desires, and in order to 'grow up', we try to eliminate or at least minimize selfish desires and motives from our agenda.

The Master clearly reminds us that it is only by spiritual practice, by meditation, that we can kill the ego. In his role as a spiritual mentor, he gives us the technique and shares his valuable insight and wisdom. By his personal example, he motivates us to strive towards our goal

while, like a loving parent, he gives us the space to learn from our own experience.

Just as in other facets of our lives we develop proficiency with effort, practice and experience, so it is with spirituality. We need not be concerned with how much we are progressing on the path. We need not measure our performance against any benchmark or compare ourselves to others. The mystics remind us that we have to alter this result-oriented mindset and simply work on improving the quality of our meditation. Ultimately, this is what will make the difference. We have to remember that spiritual growth comes from grace, and the Lord alone is our ultimate resource.



The reality of spiritual progress is first measured not by inner experiences, but by increasing levels of serenity and contentment, by acceptance of one's karmas or destiny, and by how we behave when in contact with our fellow human beings. Are we now kinder, more helpful, more tolerant than before we were initiated? Are we only interested in inner experiences or do we have a growing sense of the extraordinary experience to be had simply in the effort of being truly compassionate to others, in the work of being true human beings? The practice of meditation will naturally find expression in the details of daily life and in the way we relate to others.

Living Meditation

Another Chance

Reincarnation, transmigration, the cycle of birth and death, the wheel of eighty-four – these beliefs about what happens after death are easy to understand. To put it simply: From the day of creation, ever since we were separated from the Lord and sent to this realm of birth and death, our soul has been transmigrating from one life form to another according to our karmas.

Sant Mat teachings affirm that there are 8,400,000 species that we needed to evolve from, before achieving this human form. Our 'human being level' is a unique stage, since we are the only species in the entire creation that possesses the ability and potential to attain both self- and God-realization, enabling us to merge back with our Creator. However, mystics tell us that whenever we obtained the human form in the past, we became engrossed in worldly pleasures and pursuits, and thus failed to realize our true purpose. We therefore continue to revolve miserably around the wheel of transmigration with no end in sight. Furthermore, despite our unfortunate plight, we continue to remain ignorant, clinging constantly to worldly objects and affection.

Even though we claim to understand this, the problem is that for many of us it remains just a concept, and we do not fully grasp the depth and power of this seemingly cruel reality. We need to awaken to the truth that salvation and God-realization can only be attained in this human life form. In no other form of existence, including the forms of deities, angels, gods and goddesses, can we realize the truth, and become one with the Lord. Saints throughout the ages have reminded us of this invaluable opportunity, and how we can make best use of it. They have pleaded with us, begged us, warned us and

lovingly explained this to us. They have left no stone unturned to enlighten us. Their message to each one of us is loud and clear.

You faltered through a million lives before you found this rare human form. Do not waste it this time – devote every moment to remembering God.

Soami Ji Maharaj, *Sar Bachan Poetry*

Great Master often gave examples from the Bhagavad Gita:

Krishna himself said to Udho that a worm crawling nearby had many times been Indra, the god of the heavens and Brahma, the creator. When such deities could not escape the cycle of eighty-four, how could an ordinary soul do so?

With the Three Masters, Vol. II

Kabir further explains:

On obtaining this beautiful human body, worship the Supreme Lord before doing anything else ... Remember, you will not get such a body again for ages and then you will repent most bitterly. In the wheel of eighty-four, human life is incomparable.

Kabir, The Great Mystic

Saints have begged us to wake up and seek a deeper understanding; to pay close attention and heed their message. The human form is the last step on the evolutionary ladder. We are now just a single step away from reaching our goal – any negligence, any laziness on our part will prove to be a catastrophic mistake resulting in us having to start over from the bottom rung of the ladder.

To further emphasize the severity of our dilemma, Maharaj Sawan Singh explains:

To pass the entire round of 8,400,000 different forms of species would take the soul many aeons to complete. Even if an average of ten years were to be allowed for one life – though this is an underestimate since there are trees that live on earth for two thousand years, and even the ordinary banyan and peepal trees in Indian villages live for five or six centuries each – it would require eighty-four million years for a soul to get the human body again.

Discourses on Sant Mat, Vol. 1

Can we really afford to wait for another chance to meet the Lord? Are we really willing to waste this precious opportunity of a human experience?

Life after life they will suffer in the wheel of birth and death and they may never get this human form again. Now that you have gotten this rare human form, use it well and fulfil the purpose of life.

Soami Ji Maharaj, Sar Bachan Poetry

With such powerful examples from the saints, it should automatically be engraved in our mind that the wheel of eighty-four is very real, and our only way to escape is to catch hold of the sound current. Attending daily to our meditation with keen determination and a strong resolve, together with the grace of our Master, is all that it takes for us to finally be free.

Let us not regret, at the time of our death, that we have wasted this invaluable gift of our human existence in social obligations, attachments and possessions. It is now time to wake up, fully comprehend the impact of our pitiful situation, place our spiritual goal as our life's priority, and dedicate our utmost efforts towards attending to meditation daily. We must remember that without this, there is no release from the vicious wheel. We have reached the final stage of our journey; just one step away lies true freedom – one careless move could be disastrous. Who knows when we may receive another chance?



*The true value of the human body is realized after death,
when man regrets that he has squandered
his most precious possession.*

Maharaj Jagat Singh, *The Science of the Soul*

The Coat of Patience

Sukman, a disciple of Maulana Rum, asked that he be given the power of a prophet. His Master advised him that the right time had not come and that he should go and offer himself as a servant to King David.

So, he went to the king's palace only to find him hard at work at the blacksmith's workshop. Sukman was curious as to what the king was making, but restrained himself, thinking, "I'd better not ask and simply remain silent."

Then, he perceived that the king was making a suit of armour. Again, he was tempted to enquire why he was making it and bade his mind, "Sit down, be quiet and have patience!" However, the temptation persisted and so he questioned himself, "Why not ask and have a quick settlement of my curiosity?" But a voice within cautioned that he would not be given the real, deep, significant reply even if he asked a hundred questions, so he finally decided to keep quiet.

After some time, the work being completed, David gave Sukman the coat of mail and said, "This armour is invincible, it will give you complete protection in battle. It is the coat of patience which keeps away anxiety. It is the touchstone which converts brass into gold. Always keep quiet and have patience and everything will come your way. Do not complain to the Lord, questioning, 'Why, why this, why that?' Have faith and patience."

In Search of the Way



Have patience! In time, even grass becomes milk.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Legacy of Love*

The Sacred Bond

As struggling disciples on this path, we face the roller coaster of ups and downs in our lives and our emotions: from the heights of excitement that we feel in the presence of our Master to the depths of despair and longing that consume us in his separation.

We sit in the darkness of meditation, searching for his light and love, feeling and knowing that it is there, but unable to reach it due to our own shortcomings. In the words of Saint John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic, “I entered I knew not where, and there I stood, not knowing, nothing left to know.”

How has the Master become a part of every aspect of our lives? What is this feeling that he has planted inside of us? He has silently crept into our hearts and lovingly hidden himself in the recesses of our consciousness. Any words we may attempt to describe these feelings are inadequate and can only fail to do justice to his presence.

In *With a Great Master in India* it is written:

What is the divine mystery of the love of a disciple for his Master? It is one of the most absorbing themes of discipleship. It is something without a parallel in the ordinary walks of life. What is it? How can it be explained? What is the mystery of that holy bond which makes men and women, even in the hour of death, utterly forget all earthly ties and cling to the Master alone? Fortunately, this is one theme upon which this disciple can speak from personal experience, although he is well aware, perhaps because of that experience itself, that he can never give adequate expression to this theme.

Since coming to India, this disciple has been blessed with the daily companionship of many disciples whose devotion to the Master has written one of the most beautiful pages in the story of his life. Not only these, but the abiding devotion of the Master himself to his Master adds interest to the theme and crowns the relation itself with undying glory. It is a sacred bond that once formed, is never broken, and its divine fragrance never diminishes through unnumbered years. But like other features of this holy path, the essence of it cannot be written down in words. To be understood, it must be experienced.

The Master has planted in each one of us the seed of spirituality. He lovingly tends to this seed and encourages us to feed it with the waters of Shabd and meditation. He gives us the faith to persist, even though we may falter in our pursuit. The Master shares with us a sacred bond. And every time we almost forget his presence, he sends us little reminders, waking us up from this slumber of illusion.

Never think for a moment that you are at such a long distance from me. The Master in his Shabd form is within you, and is watching you and looking after you in every way.

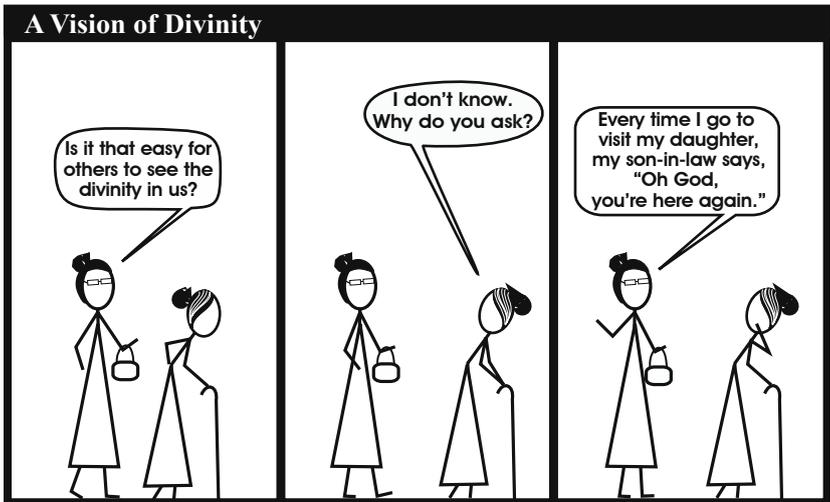
Maharaj Sawan Singh, *The Dawn of Light*

We are often overcome with feelings of failure. Our lack of visible results tend to drag us down. Our minds get filled with negative emotions and we almost give up and lose ourselves. But our Master never thinks of failure. He patiently lifts us up from the depths of our depression and holds us up, filling us with even more love, allowing it to brim over the surface and spill into the depths of our being.

This is summarized beautifully in *With a Great Master in India*:

All those who have walked this holy path know well that in all the world there is no relation so close and so sacred as that between Master and pupil. There is no other relation so crowned with the frenzy of divine joy. When the disciple feels that every ray of light that radiates from the Master carries with it streams of life itself, he must love him. When he realizes in the depths of his being that the Master is the embodiment of the Supreme Essence, now engaged in recreating the disciple after the image and likeness of the ineffable Lord, then he knows that life without the Master would be an insufferable calamity.

SPIRITUALISTICKS[®]



Interest versus Principal

Hazur Maharaj Charan Singh had got himself a new tonga, and one weekend he travelled in it from Sirsa to Sikanderpur, on a visit. In those days, this was the only conveyance which could go from the main road to the house and farm, since the road was neither paved nor tarred. Hazur Maharaj Ji's father owned an old buck-board, which is like a carriage.

When at Sikanderpur, it was Great Master's routine to go to the farm and the sugar mill every morning. Hazur Maharaj Ji strongly wished for the Great Master to go in his tonga and managed to have this request conveyed to him through Shadi, the Great Master's personal attendant.

While the Great Master was getting ready to go, Hazur Maharaj Ji's father was standing near his buck-board, in which to take the Great Master to the farm. So when Shadi conveyed Hazur Maharaj Ji's request, the Great Master looked at him and his new tonga, but went towards the buck-board, saying: "One's own son is the best of sons, one's own husband is the best of men amongst men."

Hazur Maharaj Ji's father drove the Great Master away to the farm and the sugar mill. Naturally, Hazur Maharaj Ji was greatly disappointed and his face fell, but he did not say anything. The next weekend, he again came to Sikanderpur in his tonga. As usual, in the morning the Great Master got ready to go to the farm and the sugar mill. Hazur Maharaj Ji stood near his tonga and his father had the buck-board ready.

Hazur Maharaj Ji did not have the courage to get his request repeated.

The Great Master – to the great joy of Hazur Maharaj Ji – got into his tonga, saying to Shadi, "Interest is dearer than principal."

Treasure Beyond Measure



The Silence of Meditation

All perfect mystics emphasize the value of silence, and its practice is one of the foremost requirements of any spiritual path. Silent vigil has been demanded of the seeker in almost every faith. But modern man seems to be either afraid of silence or willing to disregard its impact altogether. Nowadays, it is the clamour of the outer world which is of interest, and silence that is shunned. François Fénelon, the seventeenth-century French mystic, writes:

How rare it is to find a soul still enough to hear God speak.

As quoted in *The Eight Points of the Oxford Group*

What is meditation? Meditation is simply the preparation for the ultimate encounter with one's true self, and the eventual reunion with the Father in the oneness of the Shabd. The Lord is already present within us. All we have to do is realize His active presence within us. But there is a catch – He is hidden and also utterly silent.

There is only one way to get to Him, which is to get into that silence and stillness within. We have to play the hide-and-seek game; we have to enter His court on His terms and on His playing field. Everything else we do hardly matters unless we are willing to go forth and meet Him in the arena of silence.

Mystics explain to us that because of the condition of our minds, we are presently too involved in identifying ourselves with our external environment and things of this creation. The clamouring noise of our thoughts, our judgements, our analyses are constantly buzzing in the well-oiled machine of our mind, and that is all we hear, even during

the so-called silent moments of our life when we are neither talking nor listening to anything or anyone.

This ongoing noise is not an imaginary one but quite real. It presents a significant barrier on the path to God-realization, and our duty is to eliminate it and its effects.

Evagrius of Pontus, an Egyptian monk, has given us this classic definition of prayer which has been handed down through the centuries:

Prayer is raising the mind and heart to God through the laying aside of thoughts.

Open Mind, Open Heart

The aim of meditation is to silence the mind, to still it and free it from its instability and natural tendency towards dispersion. In meditation, we gather the mind at its very centre, and we lead it beyond all its activities to the stillness of pure self-awareness.

As we have heard in satsang so many times, we cannot see our own reflection in turbulent and shaky waters. Only when the water is completely still, does the image take shape.

As François Fénelon wrote:

God is our true Friend, who always gives us the counsel and comfort we need. Our danger lies in resisting Him; so it is essential that we acquire the habit of hearkening to His voice, or keeping silence within, and listening so as to lose nothing of what He says to us. We know well enough how to keep outward silence, and to hush our spoken words, but we know little of interior silence. It consists in hushing our idle, restless, wandering imagination, in quieting the promptings of our

worldly minds, and in suppressing the crowd of unprofitable thoughts which excite and disturb the soul.

The Spiritual Letters of Archbishop Fénelon: Letters to Men

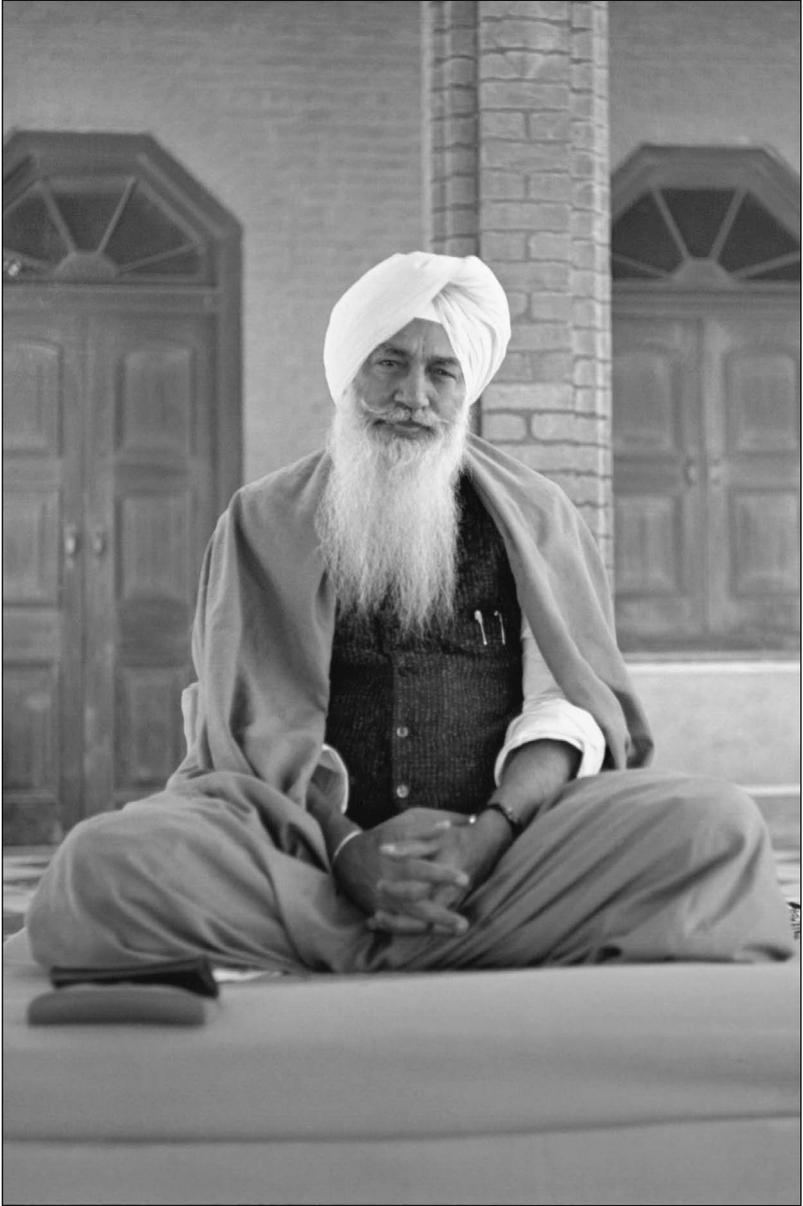
Our primary goal on the path of Sant Mat is to get to that interior silence. And the universal remedy prescribed by all perfect mystics is meditation. Satsangs, books and seva are tools that will help us on the way but they will not take us to that silence within. It is only meditation that can take us deeper and bring us in contact with the eternal Shabd.



*I have wandered in pursuit of voices that drew me,
yet led me nowhere.*

*Now let me sit in peace and listen to Your words
in the soul of my silence.*

Rabindranath Tagore, The Heart of God



Maharaj Charan Singh

Just Be with Him

*In the early hour as I sit in your presence,
my heart sings to you.
Please accept this little offering,
and forgive all my failings.
I only have you to turn to.
Enfold my heart with your constant presence,
and fill it with the sweetness of your love.*

As the years go by on the spiritual path, each disciple goes through different phases – there are days when we are enthusiastic and inspired to attend to meditation, and there are other days when we feel numb, and our spiritual practice becomes a cumbersome task. However, whether one feels inspired or not, each disciple retains a deep-rooted desire to please the Master and makes every effort, in spite of the struggle. But what can a disciple give his Master, especially when he thinks that he is failing on the spiritual path?

Our courteous Lord does not want His servants to despair even if they fall frequently and grievously. Our falling does not stop His loving us.

Julian of Norwich, as quoted in *The Art of Prayer*

When we go through our spiritual struggles, the Master does not stop loving us. Each time we try to stay awake in our drowsy state, each time our sluggish mind wanders and we fight to bring it back, each time we push ourselves to sit for meditation, we invoke more grace from the Master. We may not always know it, but he is aware of

our every effort. We do not need words to tell him what we are going through, for he knows.

There is no such thing as a prayer in which 'nothing is done' or 'nothing happens', although there may well be a prayer in which nothing is perceived or felt or thought.

Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

What does 'failing' really mean to a disciple? One of the main problems we all face is the inability to maintain our concentration. As we sit for meditation, all kinds of thoughts disturb the mind. Within minutes of starting our simran, we mentally add items to our list of things to do; we dwell on the past or on imaginary events; we worry unnecessarily about trivial things and so forth. When concentration is difficult, our meditation becomes a struggle.

A wandering mind at the time of meditation is mostly the result of what preoccupies our mind throughout the day. Thus, we need to redirect our daily lives by reducing our preoccupation with the many worldly interactions and distractions that leave an indelible mark on our subconscious, and instead focus our daily thoughts on the Lord and His love. The Master tells us that concentration will be perfected with practice; to him our lack of concentration is never a failure. In fact, he tells us to bring those failures to him so that he can turn them into successes. The Master is more concerned with our sincere effort and loving devotion.

In time, we learn to meditate without calculating, without analysing, without doubting. We build the conviction and faith that the Lord hears our heart, our longing, our every regret and every gratitude. It is as Maharaj Charan Singh once explained:

Mechanical words are not necessary. Prayer should come from the heart, and the heart speaks without language, without words. No set prayers move Him, but the prayer from the heart moves Him. We should be in tune with the Lord, with our heart, from within.

The Master Answers

This becomes the essence of our meditation, to be constantly with Him. Our goal in meditation is not to make things happen the way we want, but to become aware of His presence. He does not ask for perfection; He only asks for our time and attention. As we move forward in our spiritual journey and gradually learn to silence the mind, we learn to stop looking for results, to stop thinking about how our meditation feels, and instead focus on spending that precious time with Him.

The challenges and struggles on the spiritual journey do not affect the true disciple. Eventually, the disciple becomes 'comfortable' with the struggle and does not wish to part from the pain, for that becomes his driving force. Mother Teresa, in the book *Come Be My Light*, writes:

The greater the pain and darker the darkness, the sweeter will be my smile to God ... I want to smile even at Jesus and so hide if possible the pain and the darkness of my soul even from Him ... Pray that I may love God with a love with which He has never been loved before.

In the same light, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux writes:

*Should my roses be gathered from amid thorns, I will sing
notwithstanding, and the longer and sharper the thorns, the
sweeter will grow my song.*

The Little Flower of Jesus

Ultimately, the Lord gives us the grace to put in the effort towards our spiritual practice. The lack of concentration, the temporary dryness in our love, and the darkness are not in our hands: they are in His, and none of these are our failures. What matters most is that we serve Him with a simple, childlike heart and just enjoy being with Him.



*While He strips of everything the souls who give themselves absolutely to Him,
God gives them something which takes the place of all – His love.*

Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Art of Prayer*

Did You Know?

Attachments gradually slacken as one begins to enjoy meditation. With the inner bliss that one experiences, all worldly pleasures and attachments begin to appear less attractive and unimportant.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Quest for Light*

* * *

So long as the seeing faculty is not developed, mere listening to the Shabd does not bestow full benefit. By fixing the attention within, one is able to behold many spiritual regions. So long as the seeing faculty does not develop, the hearing faculty of the soul does not ascend to higher planes. By developing the seeing power of the soul we achieve dhyana. And it is this alone that leads us to true knowledge.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Philosophy of the Masters, Vol. 1*

* * *

For those who have been initiated, the Guru never dies. If he leaves his physical frame, he is with his initiates in his astral and causal bodies, and takes care of them; though obviously he cannot deliver discourses and directions in the physical frame after his departure. His external guidance is carried on by his successor.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

The Master Answers

A selection of questions and answers with Maharaj Charan Singh

Q: *Even when sitting and meditating without concentrating – the mind may be wandering – does even that have its own value?*

A: That has its own value. If we are always frightened that we will never be able to walk, then we will never be able to walk. Even if out of two hours, you get only ten minutes of real concentration to your credit, it's worth having. The next day, you may be able to get fifteen minutes of concentration; the third day you may be able to add another ten minutes. Slowly and slowly, you will be able to increase your time. If during the first day you sit for two hours and you say, "I don't concentrate at all," and from then on you don't sit in meditation, that is no good. We must give our proper time to simran and meditation every day.

Die to Live

* * *

Q: *Master, will this forced meditation bring about good meditation?*

A: Yes, naturally. When one is not in the habit of sitting at all, the first step is that one has to force oneself to sit at least. To sit still is a great credit, and when you learn to sit still, then you learn also to still your mind. The first problem is to still the body. It doesn't want to sit in one place even for twenty minutes. So first you get into the habit of stilling the body, then you get the habit of stilling the mind.

Die to Live

Q: *When you begin to approach that level and the wrappings of the soul are being removed, how do you feel?*

A: When the wrappings are being removed, you first see that Light and all those things inside your own self, and you know that the wrappings are being removed. Then you become nobler, more loving, and more and more devotion for the Father comes in you. When the clouds start disappearing, then the light of the sun starts shining. You always know when the clouds disperse and light comes. Similarly, you also know about yourself. When the mind becomes better or purer or nobler, that Light penetrates you, and your whole attitude in life changes, your characteristics and approach to life change.

Die to Live

* * *

Q: *How are we brought to meditation?*

A: By the grace of the Lord. There is no other way. We may say that we have become devotees of the Lord because we have found the right teachings, we have found the path, we have found the Master. It would be quite wrong to think so. Actually, when He wants to put us on the path, when He wants to give us His devotion, He creates such circumstances that we have no other option but to follow that path. We are ultimately drawn to the path. It is all in His hands. When He wishes it, everything becomes clear to us. First is His grace. With His grace, we will meet a Master. Through contact with the Master, we will be put on the path, and with our efforts we invoke His grace to travel on that path until ultimately our practice will lead us to our home and we merge back into Him. Everything is interconnected. Without the Lord's grace, nothing can happen.

The Master Answers

Who Comforts Our Beloved Comforter?

We are living in a precious time. Amidst the chaos and uncertainty of Kaliyuga, where death and disease are rampant and human values are rapidly declining, we are blessed with the privilege of being under the shelter of a perfect living Master. And as we go through this turbulent time, facing our own individual karmic load, there is tremendous comfort in our Master's presence, in his teachings and in his all-embracing love. His presence empowers our sense of purpose, his teachings illuminate our understanding, and his love is our most sublime source of inspiration.

One cannot help but wonder, though, about the Master himself. He gives so much time and attention to his sangat, and by the multitudes they turn to him incessantly for comfort, guidance and support. But what about him? Who comforts our beloved Comforter?

The teachings of Sant Mat explain that a true Master transcends all the limitations of mere man. He has developed the highest possible degree of strength, imbibed all the positive virtues of a perfect man and, having attained conscious oneness with the Supreme One, he lives in the world but is not of it.

Notwithstanding this fact, it is also true that the Master must enter the stream of human life in order to accomplish his mission – to take his allotted souls back to their true home. So he lives in the world like everyone else: He has duties and responsibilities, he goes through the pressures and stress of everyday life and, although he is not fettered by human bonds and is not a slave to the objects of his affection, he still feels the joys and sorrows of the human experience.

Because the Master serves as God's earthly mirror, he cannot express the frailties of a human being – though as a human being, he too feels sorrow, pain and the entire gamut of human emotions.

Legacy of Love

The Masters have always said that their sangat is their real family, and their life is testimony to this statement. They devote all their time to the spiritual well-being of their disciples, and the welfare of their sangat is always their main concern. It has been said that if anyone would like to study the biography of a Master, one only has to look at his devotees. This statement holds true simply because the perfect Master literally gives his life to his beloved sangat – to us.

Each one of us is a part of that sangat. As precious as the Master is to us, we too are his beloved drops – his little spiritual children – and it is precisely this relationship that makes everything we do have an effect on him. It makes our discipleship, our way of life and our devotion to the teachings a great source of happiness for our Master. When we honour his teachings with our obedience, we pay tribute to his efforts. When we give up worldly pleasures to pursue spiritual work, we make him feel like a proud father. And when we meditate sincerely with love and devotion, we convey the intensity of our love in a way that nothing else can.

In *The Path of the Masters*, it says in no uncertain terms that the physical Master's work is time-limited. It means that every Master has a definite period – his lifetime – in which to do his work. And when that time has expired, his work on earth will be finished and the life of his physical body will be over. Except for the Master, no one knows when that will be. So, what we have before us is a small window of sweet opportunity to please our Beloved while he is labouring hard for us on this earthly plane; to make him happy and to bask in his pleasure.

There is no doubt. We *are* living in a precious time, amidst the chaos and uncertainty of Kaliyuga, we are blessed with the privilege of being able to comfort our Beloved with our little effort and our simple devotion. And as we go through this turbulent time, facing our own individual karmic load, we can show him through our sincere and unwavering commitment to the spiritual path that we are so very grateful for his presence in our lives – for being our very life.

And even though we know that the grace that can fulfil and sustain this kind of devotion is from the Beloved himself, it is our loving effort that moves him. And when the Beloved is moved, he responds with the only gift that conveys his love like nothing else can. He awakens us to the ringing radiance of the ultimate Comforter – the Shabd.



*I bowed down at my Master's feet
And he raised me lovingly with his own hands.
Filled with love and gratitude, I paid homage to him.
Forever bow to such a beloved Master, says Tuka,
And repeat constantly the Name bestowed by him.*

Tukaram, The Ceaseless Song of Devotion

Repartee of the Wise

Once Rabia and her friend spent the whole night happily engaged in spiritual conversation. Next morning, Rabia's friend commented, "We spent the night so usefully." But Rabia thought otherwise. "I don't think so. We just chatted to please each other. It would have been more constructive and pleasing to the Lord had we each sat in a corner and meditated on Him all night."

* * *

A disciple questioned his Teacher why concentration was necessary when it came to meditation. The Teacher replied, "In everything in life, concentration is the key to success. Even in worldly life, a man cannot achieve success if he does not concentrate on what he does. When you talk to someone and if he is fidgety and his eyes wander around the room, would you feel that he is listening to you? You would lose interest in talking to him further. In the same way, don't expect to win the Lord's response until you are capable of sitting still and holding your attention at the third eye to await His presence."

* * *

The proud scientists called out to God, "Science has discovered the secret of life. We now have the ability to create a new type of man – healthier, smarter and improved in all ways." God smiled down at the scientists and said to them, "Go right ahead." The scientists bent over and each grabbed a handful of dirt. God gently shook His finger and said, "No, no. Use your own dirt."

Why Marriage?

One evening meeting at the Dera, a man asked Baba Ji whether it was all right for him and his girlfriend to live together without marrying. Since marriage has been devalued to such an extent, what, the man asked, was the point of getting married? The vow that was solemnized between two people as a commitment for life, that was considered sacred within the context of one's religion, in these days seems hardly worth the paper on which it is written. Where then, he said, was the need for a formal ceremony?

The Master was clear in his reply. He said that by not getting married, the gentleman was simply avoiding his responsibilities. Baba Ji quickly put before us a vivid picture of the chaos that would ensue when none are clear about their responsibilities. We saw a world of confused and distressed people – adults and children – in which no norms could be established; a world in which everyone was going in different directions – each in the way he or she wanted – and no one was ready to compromise his or her desires. We saw a world in which everyone's priority was maintaining his or her individual rights and personal freedom. But without a commitment to something beyond oneself, who would decide what was right? How quickly would such a world become a lonely nightmare of disappointment, anger, bitterness and frustration?

Marriage is one of the key institutions of civilisation. If we are to understand why it is important, we need to remind ourselves of two things in particular. First, no one can function as an island. Without cooperation and compromise, without mutually respected rules of conduct, who would decide what gets done? If I am going to pursue what I want at all costs, it may well be that what I want does not suit or

appeal to you. Second, we have to remind ourselves of the simple and self-evident truth that nothing can be achieved without commitment. We have to put our roots down deep if we are to draw sustenance from life's depths – and this cannot happen if we keep changing focus.

We need to think through these issues. In a world where values are not shared, on whom would we be able to depend? How could we raise children? Don't children absorb their values from within the family during their early years? If our early environment is stable and positive, it nurtures positive values within us. Has the science of human behaviour shown us a better way to learn the important lessons of life other than in the context of a loving family? And in a world where the family unit does not exist, how would we transmit positive values from one generation to the next? Where there is no emotional and social stability, not only is life traumatic for the children, but it affects us too.

Our code of conduct creates order and stability out of potential chaos. It reflects our fragile spiritual understanding and provides a refuge from the confusion at the surface of life. By representing more than our immediate interests, it helps us contain our actions so that we can experience the deeper truths of life. The institution of marriage is a significant element in our moral code for it provides a structure within which to grow and meet our responsibilities. Our destiny has already been written – as Jesus says in Saint Matthew, we “shall not escape from here” as long as even one “jot” remains to be paid.

When we come into a physical relationship with a person of the opposite sex, when we act in accordance with one of the deepest forces of the creation and give birth to children, whose responsibility are they if not ours? If the union does not produce children, do we think this means that no responsibilities ensue? If we devalue the physical act of creation by treating it as a means of pleasure alone, then it can

only point to our blindness: even if we do not have children, our involvement with each other runs deep through this union, so the consequences and responsibilities are commensurate and will surely have to be met one day. When we have relationships outside marriage, we are looking for the pleasures of a partnership without the responsibilities. We do not even give ourselves a chance to experience the responsibilities, for without a supportive framework it is easy to think they are not there. No sooner do we feel trouble brewing, than we are on our way – looking for happiness elsewhere.

It is a myth of our present times that happiness comes with the right partner. This suits the mind – it is always looking for variety. But we need to remind ourselves constantly that it is our mind that is our problem. It is the mind that prevents us from going beyond the physical. It alone keeps us from experiencing the inner music of the Shabd. Our mind is rooted in the layers of impressions from our previous actions and thoughts that sit like thick sound-proofing around our soul.

How far are we going to let it take us? And if we are not ready to make the commitment needed for marriage, how can we imagine we will remain committed to the journey of our soul that lies ahead? How, without commitment, can we ever experience the depths of life? We will spend our entire lives skating about on the surface. In our relationships, we may not even get to know our partner before we get disappointed or frustrated and look to change. Our problems may well manifest themselves in our relationships, but they do not originate there. We do not see that we have got things back to front, that it is for us to find happiness first within ourselves, and only then can we *build* a partnership of two happy people learning to live together in tolerance and love.

Marriage is a public statement of a commitment. By making our partnership public, we cement it. By institutionalizing it, we further cement it. No partnership is easy, and marriage is no different – so we need all the help we can get. Marriage provides a framework to hold two people together, so that in times of trouble they don't split or drift apart. It gives a reference point beyond two minds, and creates space within which their differences can exist.

Some people may argue that a private commitment to each other is sufficient. In many countries this is acceptable by law, for taxation or other purposes, so who needs a piece of paper? But if we reflect a little, we will discover this is a way of avoiding commitment. Whatever the intellect may say, who would deny that legal marriage is a significant step, even if it is no more than the simplest of ceremonies? That is maybe why the proponents of this argument wish to avoid it: legal marriage *is* binding.

If we look just a little beneath the surface, we will see that in spite of modern attitudes, most people are not really happy with what is known as a common-law marriage. The parents of the couple are often disappointed or unhappy with the situation, one or other of the partners may feel insecure, and the children are shy or embarrassed among their peers, insecure and fearful of ridicule. Like the separation or divorce of parents, it can be a private agony children harbour in their hearts, and they are powerless to do anything about it. Generally speaking, parents hold the key to the happiness of their children, and every society on earth recognizes this by having its own ways to establish a couple as a unit, the basis and backbone of the family.

Commitment, responsibility, steadiness, a concern for the well-being of others, all are aspects of love. Love, we are guided, is a *verb* – something we *do*, not just something that happens by chance. How many

times does the Master point out in the meetings that we do not even understand what love is. He explains how our difficulties arise because we confuse love with the physical. Love is beyond the physical, he keeps telling us; true love is constant and unconditional, true love does not alter with change.

We call ourselves *satsangis*. *Sat-sang*, ‘truth’ and ‘association’. It has been our good fortune to be brought into association with truth. In our essence we are the truth, the reality, for which we yearn. Call it God, call it truth, call it love, call it the Word; it is the essence of life and it is the life-force of you and me. By initiation into the practice of the Word, we are given the key to find this treasure within ourselves. It is for us to use the key. For this, too, we need commitment. We need commitment, steadfastness and courage – not every day is a sunny day on the spiritual path. We need to be clear about our priorities – but we keep forgetting them. We start to think our interests lie in our relationships, in emotional happiness right now. So easily we lose sight of the bigger picture.

By committing ourselves to live with one person, we give ourselves the opportunity to be constant and learn how to love. Marriage is “till death do us part, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health”. As we live through the years in one relationship, we learn that human love can be transformed from the excitement of romantic love and the passion of youthful lust into a deeper sort of love marked by the selflessness, compassion and generosity that come with time. When things are difficult, there is only one practical option and that is to *work on ourselves*. To achieve harmony through the ups and downs of life, we have to keep on developing. Within a marriage we can nurture friendship, so aptly and beautifully described by Hazur as a relationship “where you have a clean and clear understanding with someone – he accepts you for what you are and you accept him

for what he is. He wants to help you. You want to help him. That is friendship. It is very rare.” For a good marriage, we need big hearts filled with positive qualities – tolerance, trust, patience, compassion and forgiveness; our commitment leads us to develop these qualities within ourselves.

Marriage is a purpose-designed vessel to hold, protect and nourish earthly love. This earthly love is precious and sacred, not because it has been sanctioned by a religious organisation, but because it reflects the yearning of the soul for union with its source. It can shape the order of our world and, as it expresses itself through the love of parent and child or husband and wife, it is one of the best ways we have of making the world a better place. Rightly directed, it is the same love that will take us home. In the *Mathnawi*, Rumi says:

Love is the astrolabe of the mysteries of God. Whether love be from this earthly side or from that heavenly side, in the end it leads us yonder.

Maharaj Charan Singh, after explaining at length the protective function of marriage for those with spiritual values, ended by giving us a simple metaphor: If we want the shoe to stay on, we have to tie the lace.



If Sant Mat is followed with love and devotion, it helps one to become patient, tolerant, kind and in every way improves our nature so that we become better life partners and can render better service. We are taught to do our duty first and always as a loving service, and that also applies to husband and wife.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Light on Sant Mat*

Our Only True Friend

Man is really always alone but he thinks, and wrongly so, that he has a host of friends, possessions and attachments. At last, a time comes when he is disillusioned, and if he happens to be a satsangi, he realizes that the only real and true friend is the Master.

If we are not attached and have no expectations or unfulfilled desires, the behaviour of other people does not affect us much. After all, it is not the things themselves, but the reaction which they produce upon us which really matters. People of the world also ultimately come to this conclusion after receiving hard knocks and crushing disappointments. But a satsangi gradually and almost imperceptibly loosens the bonds of attachment in this world by devotion to Shabd.

Please have courage and faith in the Master. Now that you have learned the hollowness of the world and its possessions and attachments, you will be able to devote all your attention assiduously to simran and listening to the Sound whenever possible. As you very well know, simran or the repetition of the five holy Names is the foundation of this spiritual practice. It is by means of worldly simran, thinking of the things of this world, that we have become denizens of this plane and strangers to our own home. Therefore, we should gradually, by means of spritual simran, draw up our consciousness to the centre above the eyes, and then the Sound will automatically take care of us. We only have to do our duty and may thoroughly rest assured that the Master will do his duty; that is, he will take us at the proper time. All that is necessary is that we turn our back to the world and face the Master. He is always there to receive and welcome us with open arms.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Light on Sant Mat*

Humanity

The world, as we know it today, has its share of flaws. Many a time one is left to wonder what kind of legacy we might be leaving behind for our children. Everywhere we look, every news channel we switch on, we experience a sense of restlessness, a lack of peace.

Religions, which were created to help humankind find some sort of spiritual anchor, are now being torn apart and have become convenient excuses for the many atrocities the world is experiencing. People proudly fight one another in the name of religion, not for a minute realizing that at the crux of it all, we all share one religion – the religion of humanity. Each one of us, irrespective of our race, creed or caste, has one common identity – we are all children of that one Lord.

All spiritual teachers have come, bringing one and the same message that God is within each one of us. How then can we see differences between people? The question to ask ourselves is what can we do to change things? Surely, we cannot go about changing the ideas of every other person we know. It was Mahatma Gandhi who once said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

For all of us on this path, our aim is to achieve God-realization. We want to become one with Him. Is it possible to achieve God-realization without loving His creation? The Masters have explained that it is through our devotion to the Lord that all good qualities come within us – the more we love the Lord, the more we find ourselves loving His creation, loving one another – it makes us truly human.

There is a story told by Tolstoy about a shoemaker who in a dream heard Christ telling him, “Today I will come to you.” The next morning, the man woke up and went to work. During the day, he saw a hungry woman and gave her food. An old man passed by feeling cold, so the shoemaker let him in to keep him warm. Later on, he took

care of a child who was having trouble with his mother. At the end of the day, the man went home, and just before sleeping remembered that his dream had not come true. It is then that he heard the same voice again, “My dear friend, did you not recognize me? I was that woman, I was that old man, I was the child and his mother. You met me and you helped me. I was with you the whole day.”

The man was carrying out spontaneous acts of kindness towards complete strangers, and in that way, was reaching out to God. Our tendency as humans is to mostly see the bad in others. We are quick to judge, and quicker to pull others down on their way up to success. It is this very attitude that will eventually prevent us from achieving our goal in life. It is this attitude that creates disharmony in the world we live in today. We cannot change the way the world thinks, but every act of kindness that we perform, every good deed that we do selflessly, multiplies in ways that we are unable to imagine.

I have often said that it is a pity that people hate and cut each other's throat in the name of religion, which should rather fill them with love and devotion for the Lord. It is through love, forgiveness, and the serving of humanity that one's life becomes a single vision of the sublime beauty of God. Unfortunately, we forget the real teachings of the mystics and unnecessarily arrest them in some rigid organization, thereby giving them the shape of a religion or cult. Religion should make us at least human, if not divine.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Legacy of Love*

As human beings, it is very important to be conscious of our humanity. It is the one religion that we can all practise, one that will carry forward and help people treat each other with love and respect. It is the greatest legacy that we can leave behind.

Holding On

It has been said that the will of the Lord will never take us where the grace of the Lord cannot protect us. At times, we go through situations where no matter how hard we try, we find it difficult to maintain our composure and balance. The teachings become distant, our simran is dry and we are shaken to the core. However, it is at exactly these times that we need the teachings and our Master most.

Saints teach us the value of leading a balanced life so that we are not swayed by such situations. But what is a balanced life? In essence, leading a balanced life is to remember, whether we are at the peak of our celebrations or in the depths of our darkest hour, that ‘this too shall pass’.

Legend has it that in ancient Rome, after a battle was won, a large parade would be held to celebrate the return of the victorious generals. Amidst the adulation, in their most glorious hour, a slave would follow quietly behind the generals and whisper into their ear, “Remember, you are only a mortal.”

In *The Imitation of Christ*, there is a beautiful passage which talks about facing everyday life:

Whenever we encounter some small adversity, we much too quickly yield to discouragement and look around us for human consolation. If, like valiant men, we laboured to stand firm in the fray, certainly we would experience the Lord’s heavenly protecting help. He stands ready to aid those who fight and who place their trust in His grace – it is He who provides us with these conflicts and He wants us to be the victors.

Thomas à Kempis

Thomas à Kempis is telling us that the Lord will give us the strength to face whatever situation He places us in. On our part, all we have to do is “trust in His grace”.

However, grace is not just having a bigger bank balance, living in a large mansion, or being given the opportunity to interact with the Master physically. In such fortuitous circumstances, it is easy to stand firm and believe that the Master does what is best for us. But how do we react once things do not go our way?

In such times, we must remember that even the pain we have to undergo is the Lord’s grace. As Maharaj Charan Singh writes:

Trials and troubles are sent by the Lord for our own good, to burn away this filth. Take your woes and sorrows in that light and turn to the Lord for solace and peace ... Though one never enjoys suffering, yet we should feel happy and relieved that by His grace our immense burden is thus being lightened.

Quest for Light

So, what is the best way to face adversity? By turning to the Lord and living in the present. The Buddha was once asked to give a discourse. He simply held up a flower and said nothing. The Buddha was teaching that in this one moment, everything is perfect. All sorrows emanate from either the regrets of the past or worry about the future. If all we do is to live in the present moment, our worries and concerns will wither away.

We don’t want to make the best use of the present moment. If we make this moment happy, our past automatically becomes happy, and we have no time to worry about the future. So we must take life as it comes and spend it happily. Every moment should be spent happily. And simran helps.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Die to Live*

Indeed, the key to retaining our balance lies in our simran. Our meditation is a way to discard the past, ignore the future and focus on the present. By practising our meditation, we avoid the mental projections which focus us on the scenarios that begin with, “What if” and “If only I had”.

Ultimately, we retain our balance by holding on to our sheet anchor in life – our Master. Maharaj Jagat Singh once summarized Sant Mat into a simple sentence:

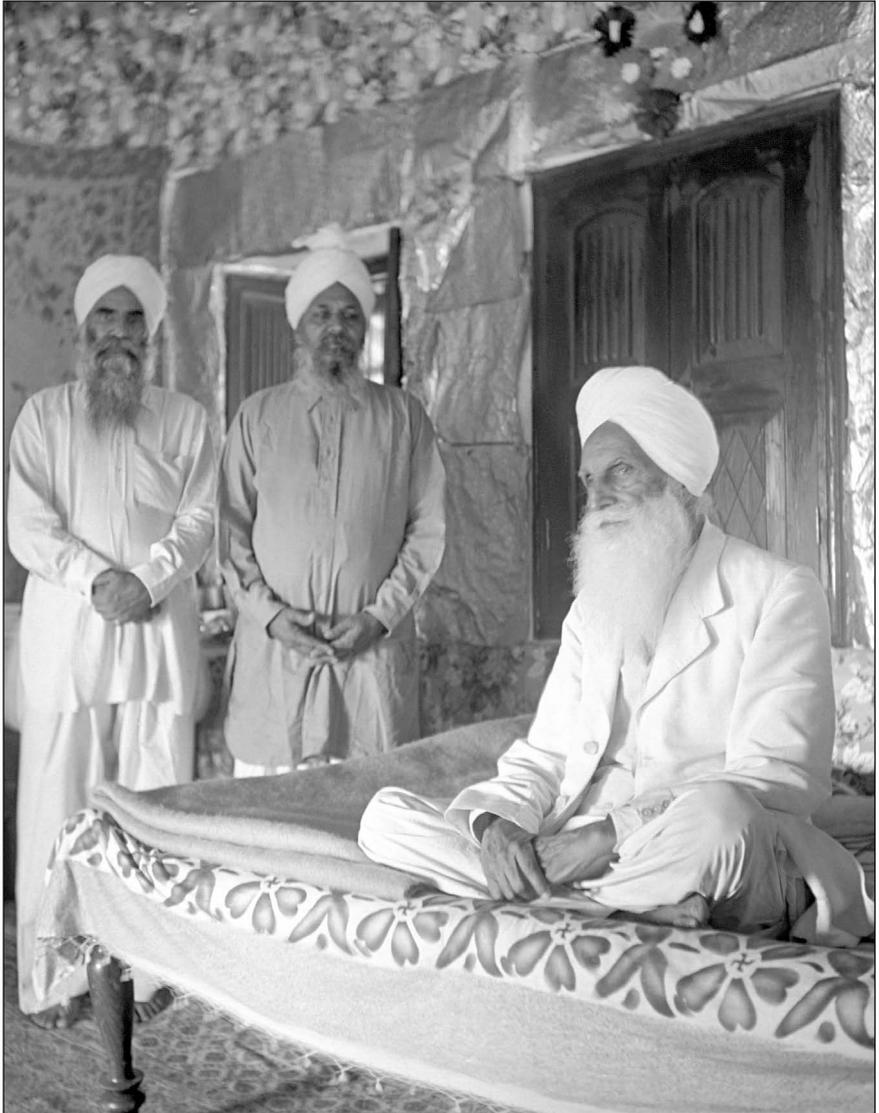
*Hold on to the Master's palla, learn the lesson and go inside –
that is the Nam practice.*

Discourses on Sant Mat, Vol II

The metaphor here is of the *palla* – the loose end of an unstructured garment like a shawl or a sari. Just as a child holds on to his mother's *palla* for security and reassurance, Sardar Bahadur Ji is evoking the emotions a disciple feels when he takes refuge in his Master's love, protection, safety and security.

In truth, we need to remember that it is our Master who is holding us close to him in difficult times. One is reminded of the oft-repeated story of the footprints in the sand. When the disciple asked the Lord why he saw only one set of footprints during the difficult phases of his life, he was told that in those dark and difficult times, the Lord Himself picked up the disciple and held him closest to Him.

So when we find ourselves gasping to retain our balance amidst the storms of daily life, we must train ourselves to hold on tight to our Master, do our meditation in accordance with his teachings – and never forget that the Lord is holding us very close to Him.



Maharaj Sawan Singh

Heart to Heart

Once, a man who wore a long gown of rough cloth and carried a begging bowl in his hands asked for initiation from the Great Master. In spite of his repeated requests, the Master refused to initiate him, and finally told him, “Living on one’s own income is necessary for the practice of Nam. What good is it to give Nam to one who lives on others’ charity?”

The next day, the man discarded his gown and replaced it with an ordinary outfit and started working as a woodcutter. After a few days, the Master initiated him. He worked persistently on the path, spending part of the day cutting wood to sell, and the rest of the day in meditation. He used to tell other fakirs that his Master had given him in forty days what books could not give him in forty years.

Heaven on Earth

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In view of the declining health of the Master, some senior satsangis requested Maharaj Jagat Singh to reduce his satsang activities, such as seva, interviews and work related to the Dera administration. But Maharaj Jagat Singh continued with his daily routine as before. An older satsangi, one day, tried to persuade him to work less and take more rest, saying that he should at least avoid meeting the army satsangis and refugees who came at odd hours and took much of his time, disturbing him even during the few moments of his free time. Maharaj Jagat Singh replied with emotion, “I feel ashamed that I have not been able to serve my Satguru’s beloved sangat well and could not give them as much love and affection as Maharaj Ji used to.”

Heaven on Earth

Book Review



The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY G.E.H. PALMER,

PHILIP SHERRARD AND KALLISTOS WARE

PUBLISHER: MACMILLAN, NEW YORK, 1979.

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In the eighteenth century, Greek monks Saint Nikodimos and Saint Makarios compiled a vast collection of spiritual writings from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries to form *The Philokalia*. They called the voluminous book they had created “a mystical school of inward prayers.” Since that time *The Philokalia* has taken a central place in the canon of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The writings included in *The Philokalia* come from over thirty different spiritual teachers – some monks, some hermits, some priests and bishops – all known by the respectful title of Church Fathers.

In this English translation by Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, *The Philokalia* is broken into four volumes. This review covers the first volume, which includes the writings of nine spiritual teachers from the fourth through the seventh centuries. Subsequent reviews will cover the later volumes.

The Church Fathers lived a life of asceticism that seems extreme by modern standards, and they often refer to it in their writings. As one of the translators warns the reader, this is a book written by ascetics and, at one level, for ascetics. But the writers’ main concern is how to attain union with God in this life. Their unwavering attitude of dedication and intense yearning for spiritual growth can be a source of inspiration to any spiritual seeker.

For them the way toward union with God is remembrance of God. They advise the seeker to become less concerned about the self and more concerned about God. Saint Mark the Ascetic (fifth century) enjoins

self-control as a support to remembrance, because “self-indulgence leads to negligence and negligence leads to forgetfulness”.

The writers advise that if we neglect to fight the “demons” we easily forget our goal. They believe that “demons” are actual creatures that can manifest and throw temptations before us, including manipulating our thoughts. Evagrius the Solitary (fourth century) writes that “All thoughts inspired by the demons produce within us conceptions of sensory objects.”

Watchfulness is the method to control thoughts and, thus, to fight the “demons.” Saint Hesychios the Priest (sixth century) points out four kinds of watchfulness that one can apply to this effort:

One type of watchfulness consists of closely scrutinizing every mental image or provocation ... A second type of watchfulness consists of freeing the heart from all thoughts, keeping it profoundly silent and still ... A third type consists in continually and humbly calling upon the Lord Jesus Christ for help. A fourth type is to always have the thought of death in one's mind.

Forgetfulness is a powerful hindrance on the spiritual path. According to Saint Hesychios, “This accursed forgetfulness is as opposed to attentiveness as water to fire, and forcibly fights against it all the time.” Saint Mark calls on the spiritual warrior to show his strength in the battle with forgetfulness. “Forgetfulness as such has no power, but acquires it in proportion to our negligence. Do not say, ‘What can I do? I don’t want to be forgetful but it happens.’ For when you did remember, you cheated over what you owed.”

The force of habit is powerful. Saint Neilos the Ascetic (fifth century) quite clearly explains the danger of bad habits:

It is a terrible thing when the force of habit holds us fast, not allowing us to rise to the state of virtue ... For habit leads to a set disposition, and this in turn becomes what may be called ‘second nature’, and it is hard to shift and alter nature. For, though it may yield a little to pressure, it quickly reasserts itself. It may be shaken

and forced to give way, but it is not permanently changed, unless through prolonged effort we retrace our steps, abandoning our bad habits.

To illustrate the danger of habits, Saint Neilos cites the example of Lot's wife from the Bible (Gen. 19:26). Warned that the city of Sodom will be destroyed because of its wickedness, she flees. But while fleeing, she looks back at the city and so is turned into a pillar of salt. He writes, "She symbolizes the force of habit which draws us back again after we have tried to make a definitive act of renunciation."

Because of the power of habit, Saint Diadochos of Photiki (fifth century) says, "At the beginning of the struggle, therefore, the holy commandments of God must be fulfilled with a certain forcefulness of will (*cf. Matt. 11:12*)."

Saint John of Karpathos (seventh century) states unequivocally, "We must use force. A man labours and struggles, and so by the use of force he escapes from destruction, always striving to raise his thoughts to holiness." And again he writes, "a great effort and much time are needed."

Remembrance of God lights the seeker's way. When one remembers God, then God also lends His aid by reminding the seeker to continue in remembrance. Saint Mark advises: "At the times when you remember God, increase your prayers, so that when you forget Him, the Lord may remind you."

Saint Diadochos explains the importance of constant remembrance:

When someone is trying to purify gold, and allows the fire of the furnace to die down even for a moment, the material which he is purifying will harden again. So, too, a man who merely practises the remembrance of God from time to time loses through lack of continuity what he hopes to gain through his prayer.

He recommends constant repetition of the prayer "Lord Jesus".

When we have blocked all its outlets by means of the remembrance of God, the intellect requires of us imperatively some task which

will satisfy its need for activity. For the complete fulfillment of its purpose we should give it nothing but the prayer "Lord Jesus". "No one," it is written, "can say 'Lord Jesus' except in the Holy Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:3) Let the intellect continually concentrate on these words in its inner shrine with such intensity that it is not turned aside to any mental images.

Saint John of Karpathos quotes the prophet Isaiah (Isa 26:20): "Come, my people, enter into your inner room ... shut your door ... and hide yourself for a brief moment." He explains that this inner room is "the shrine of your heart, which is closed to every conception derived from the sensible world, that image-free dwelling place." Here you must shut your door "to all things visible". As for hiding yourself for a brief moment, he comments that "the whole of man's life is but a moment".

The Fathers recognize that the seeker is apt to fall, and fall again. Saint John stresses perseverance. "The Lord says to you what He said to Matthew: 'Follow Me' (*Matt. 9:9*) But when you follow the Lord with burning love, it may happen that on the road of life you strike your foot against the stone of some passion and fall unexpectedly into sin." However, he writes, "each time you fall, you should get up again with the same eagerness as before."

In the end, Saint Hesychios reminds us that "the kingdom of heaven is not a reward for works, but a gift of grace prepared by the Master for His faithful servants. A slave does not demand his freedom as a reward: but he gives thanks as one who is in debt, and he receives freedom as a gift."

The Philokalia is not an easy book to read. It is dense and filled with references internal to Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Still, the seeker will find it a wonderful guide to the practice of the contemplative life, and a treasure trove of spiritual wisdom.



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